The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Summary: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911, was the deadliest industrial disaster in U.S. history. The fatal event resulted in numerous factory workers’ deaths and stunned the public. Mike Kubic, a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine, discusses the mistakes that led to this deadly disaster, as well as the drive for safer working conditions that followed. As you read, take notes on the working conditions that contributed to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and deaths, and then identify the effects of the disaster.

On the morning of March 25, 1911, New York social workers and politicians could look forward to their usual objective: helping to absorb the masses of destitute Europeans who were pouring into the city at the rate of 18,000 per month.

The newcomers were part of one of America’s biggest waves of immigrants: most of them were Jews fleeing deadly pogroms in Poland and Russia, and Italians escaping the hunger and poverty caused by poor harvests and lame economy. They arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs, and they headed straight from the pier for the teeming Lower East Side borough of Manhattan, which was then known as the gate to the New World.

Just finding a place to sleep for these multitudes in the city’s 100,000 cheap-rent tenement buildings was a big challenge. One-third of them were so run-down they had no lights in the hallways, and
200,000 of their rooms had no windows. A quarter of the families in the Lower East Side lived five or more to a room, and they frequently slept in shifts.

But by the end of the day, the best of the New York do-gooders and political bosses took on a new, even more difficult mission: they set out to initiate\textsuperscript{3} progressive laws and reforms\textsuperscript{4} that eventually changed the safety and quality of life and work in America.

\textbf{The Fire}

The event that inspired their bold agenda started that day at 4:35 p.m. in a Lower East Side clothing factory of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Someone tossed a burning match or cigarette into a big pail of scrapped cuttings, and the highly flammable material burst into a furious fire. It took less than 30 minutes for the inferno to devour the three top floors of a ten-story building filled with 500 garment workers, almost all of them recent immigrants.

The fire was New York's deadliest industrial disaster ever: it caused the deaths of 146 seamstresses and other workers—123 women and 23 men, at least two of whom were 14 year-old girls working 72 hours a week for less than a dollar a day.

The heart-rending\textsuperscript{5} tragedy was movingly described in \textit{Forverts}, a Yiddish-language\textsuperscript{6} daily newspaper whose unnamed reporter apparently had been at the scene:

“The flames spread very quickly,” he wrote. “A stream of fire rose up through the elevators to the uppermost floors. In the blink of an eye, fire appeared in all the windows and tongues of flame climbed higher and higher up the walls....

“The fire grew stronger, larger and more horrifying. The workers on the upper floors were already not able to bear the heat and, one after another, began jumping from the eighth, ninth and 10th floors down to the sidewalk, where they died....

“The firefighters were helpless.... Their ladders reached only to the seventh floor [and] they stood watching as... women fell like birds shot down from the burning floors above....

“On the eighth floor, a couple appeared in the window—a young man and woman. He held her tightly by the hand. Behind them, red flames were visible. The young man pulled the woman tenderly to his breast, kissing her on the lips, and then he let her go. She sprang off and landed heavily on the sidewalk. He leapt down and fell hard next to her, dead....
“They transported the dead to the station houses and the wounded to the hospitals. But there were not enough ambulances and patrol wagons to do the job, so the neighborhood grocers, butchers and peddlers lent their trucks and pushcarts....”

**Demand For Change**

The next day, the public’s horror over the devastating incident was joined by anger over what caused it.

The first blunder, the newspapers pointed out, was the order of Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the wealthy owners of the Triangle Company, that the factory’s doors and exits must be locked during the work hours.

The then common rule was meant to keep the workers from taking unauthorized breaks, but this time, it had terrible consequences: some of the foremen with the keys were among the fire’s first victims, and they and the workers in their departments remained trapped behind the locked doors.

Second, many of the employees who did get out in the hallway still could not escape because the stairwells were on fire, and the poorly maintained elevators were either too slow or crashed.

The public was shocked also by the short ladders, leaking water hoses, and other abysmally inadequate equipment of the firefighters, who didn’t even have an axe with which to force open the doors and exits.

And in the following days as the newspapers’ coverage shifted from the fire to the deplorable pay, working conditions, and living quarters of the immigrants, New Yorkers began losing their indifference to the fate of the newcomers. A subsequent sentence of Blanck and Harris to a scandalous $20 fine (equivalent to about $500 in today’s economy) completed the change of the political atmosphere. The indignant public demanded a dramatic change, and New York politicians showed they had listened to the *vox populi*.

According to David von Drehle’s prize-winning book *Triangle—the Fire That Changed America*, the most effective response to the post-fire disclosures came from two young members of the Tammany Hall, a Democratic Party organization that traditionally dominated the New York City and State politics.
One of them was Alfred (Al) E. Smith, a Catholic grade-school dropout and a witty and irresistible charmer who, von Drehle wrote, “mastered the circular, windy language of the bill-drafting priesthood,” knew “as well as anyone in Albany (New York’s State capital) whose bread was buttered where,” and was notorious for his skill in putting this information to use.

The other legal whiz was Robert (Bob) F. Wagner, an energetic and forceful politician known for his ability to ram new laws through a reluctant legislature. Both he and Smith were sons of immigrants and political prodigies: Wagner was 33 years old when he became the youngest leader of the New York State Senate, and Smith was elected the body’s majority leader at the age of 38.

Adding to their effectiveness as reformers was an informal alliance they formed with 30-year-old Frances Perkins, a Boston-educated member of an old Maine family and a prominent social worker who shared with the “Tammany Twins” a deep sympathy for the workers and immigrants.

The Work of the Three Reformers

Before the fire, Perkins was already fighting for workers’ rights and a 54-hour work week as the executive secretary of Consumers’ League, a nonprofit advocacy group. Her big contribution to the Tammany reforms was to make herself an expert on workplace safety, and to support Wagner’s and Smith’s most important accomplishment, which was the creation of the Factory Investigating Commission.

Chaired by Wagner and co-chaired by Smith, the group was charged by the New York State legislature to “investigate factory conditions in [NYC] and other cities and to report remedial measures [necessary] to prevent hazard or loss of life among employees through fire, unsanitary conditions, and occupational diseases.”

According to von Drehle, the “Tammany Twins” then “set a blistering pace” that averaged nearly one public hearing a week, interviewing more than 220 witnesses and producing nearly 3,500 pages of testimony.

The Commission hired field agents to do on-site inspections of factories, first in the state’s nine largest cities and, in the next year, an additional 36 communities with industrial plants. They started by checking on fire safety and moved on to broader issues of the risks of injury in the factory environment.

In 1913, Wagner and Smith pushed 25 bills through the New York legislature, a record that according to von Drehle’s *Triangle* was “unmatched at that time in American history.”
The laws were designed to correct every deficiency revealed in the Lower East Side fire: for example, it required automatic sprinklers in high-rise buildings. Fire drills became mandatory in large shops. Factory doors had to be unlocked and had to swing outward.

Other reforms mandated better building access and exits, the use of fireproofing materials, the availability of fire extinguishers, and the installation of alarm systems. Going beyond safety measures, the reform provided for better eating and toilet facilities for workers, and limited the number of hours that women and children could work. To enforce the new laws, the Factory Commission instituted a complete reorganization of the state’s Department of Labor.

The legislative surge made New York one of America’s most progressive states and gave Wagner, Smith and Perkins a nationwide reputation as allies of the working class. Thanks to their work, the trio left behind one legacy of particularly incalculable value: today’s risk of death in an American work place is one one-thirtieth of what it was before the Triangle factory fire.

Notes
1. Teem (verb) : to be full or swarming with
2. “Multitude” means a large number.
3. Initiate (verb) : to cause a process or action to begin
4. Reform (noun) : an amendment or change of what is defective, corrupt, or wrong
5. causing great sadness or distress
6. Yiddish is the historical language of Jewish people in Eastern Europe, who are also known as Ashkenazi Jews or Ashkenazim.
7. Blunder (noun) : a stupid or careless mistake
8. A foreman is a worker who supervises and directs other workers.
9. Abysmal (adjective) : extremely bad; appalling
10. Deplorable (adjective) : shockingly bad in quality
11. Indifference (noun) : a lack of interest, concern, or sympathy
12. “Subsequent” means coming after something in time.
13. Indignant (adjective) : feeling or showing anger at what is perceived as unfair treatment
14. A Latin phrase that translates to “the voice of the people,” meaning a popular opinion.

15. To disclose something is to make new (or hidden) information known.

16. Notorious (adjective) : famous or well known, typically for some bad quality or deed.

17. a politician

18. Prodigy (noun) : a young person with amazing qualities or abilities.

19. Prominent (adjective) : important; famous.

20. An advocacy group supports a certain cause or proposal, and publicly calls for support of said cause.

21. Remedial (adjective) : giving or intended as a remedy or cure.

22. A disease that occurs as a result of work or any occupational activity.

23. Deficiency (noun) : a failing or shortcoming.

24. Surge (noun) : a sudden large increase, force, or movement.

25. An “ally” is a person, group, or nation that is associated with others for a common cause or purpose.

26. too great to be calculated or estimated.
Assignment 1 - Guided Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer. When you locate the answer for the multiple choice questions, please highlight the correct response using the highlight feature on the toolbar above (the highlight feature looks like a little marker).

1. Why were masses of immigrants coming to the New World?
   A. They were escaping dangerous or unlivable conditions in other countries.
   B. They heard that there were great opportunities in America.
   C. They were deported from the countries they previously called home and forced to relocate.
   D. They heard about the improved working conditions in America.

2. Which of the following statements best describes the impact of the factory fire?
   A. Many people died, but the number would have been larger if not for the heroics of the fire department.
   B. The loss of life was extreme due to unsafe conditions and a fire department that didn’t have the tools to help.
   C. Many people died, but this was largely due to extreme panic.
   D. The local workers helped to save hundreds of lives and their heroism helped to avoid a disaster.

3. Why were workers unable to evacuate the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory?
   A. The doors were locked and elevators poorly maintained.
   B. The foremen refused to let workers out when it wasn’t a scheduled break.
   C. The stairs were poorly maintained and collapsed under the weight of the workers.
   D. The fire spread too fast for workers to act.

4. How did the people of New York respond to the fire?
   A. They were unaffected by the fire and the fates of the workers.
   B. They blamed the immigrants for the fire.
   C. They only responded after the Tammany Twins brought up the issue.
   D. They demanded that their politicians bring about reform.

5. What was the purpose of the Factory Investigating Commission?
   A. to provide immigrants working in factories with additional resources
   B. to increase pay and the quality of factory workers’ living conditions
   C. to make working conditions all around safer for workers
   D. to punish factory owners who were not running safe factories

6. What is one example of how working conditions changed in factories because of Wagner, Smith, and Perkins?
   A. Factories were designed so that work place accidents were completely eliminated.
   B. Factories were required to have equipment that would help combat a fire in the event of one.
   C. All workers received higher wages.
   D. All workers were required to work less hours weekly, thus eliminating mistakes caused by exhaustion.
1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the claim of the text?

A. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was the disaster that brought to attention the need for improved working conditions in America.
B. The two men solely responsible for improving working conditions in America were Robert Wagner and Alfred E. Smith.
C. While the improvements made to working conditions were beneficial, they were too small to create lasting change in America.
D. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was only one of many senseless disasters in American history.

2. PART B: Which piece of evidence from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

A. “The fire was New York’s deadliest industrial disaster ever: it caused the deaths of 146 seamstresses and other workers…” (Paragraph 6)
B. “The then common rule was meant to keep the workers from taking unauthorized breaks, but this time, it had terrible consequences…” (Paragraph 10)
C. “And in the following days as the newspapers’ coverage shifted from the fire to the deplorable pay, working conditions, and living quarters of the immigrants, New Yorkers began losing their indifference to the fate of the newcomers.” (Paragraph 13)
D. “The legislative surge made New York one of America’s most progressive states and gave Wagner, Smith and Perkins a nationwide reputation as allies of the working class.” (Paragraph 25)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of the word “destitute” as used in paragraph 1?

A. Extremely fearful
B. Lacking basic necessities
C. Feeling great excitement
D. Difficult to control

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

A. “…Europeans who were pouring into the city at the rate of 18,000 per month.” (Paragraph 1)
B. “They arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs…” (Paragraph 2)
C. “…they headed straight from the pier for the teeming Lower East Side borough…” (Paragraph 2)
D. “Just finding a place to sleep for these multitudes in the city’s 100,000 cheap-rent tenement buildings was a big challenge.” (Paragraph 3)

5. PART A: How do the characteristics of Robert Wagner and Alfred E. Smith compare?

A. Both men were extremely committed to improving working conditions in America.
B. Robert Wagner was considered to be the more intelligent of the Tammany Twins, as Alfred E. Smith never finished grade school.
C. Despite not finishing grade school, Alfred E. Smith had a better grasp on bill drafting than Robert Wagner.
D. Neither Robert Wagner nor Alfred E. Smith were as dedicated as Frances Perkins when it came to fighting for safer working conditions.

6. PART B: Which piece of evidence from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
A. “One of them was Alfred (Al) E. Smith, a Catholic grade-school dropout and a witty and irresistible charmer...” (Paragraph 15)

B. “The other legal whiz was Robert (Bob) F. Wagner, an energetic and forceful pol known for his ability to ram new laws through a reluctant legislature.” (Paragraph 16)

C. “Before the fire, Perkins was already fighting for workers’ rights and a 54-hour work week as the executive secretary of Consumers’ League, a nonprofit advocacy group.” (Paragraph 18)

D. “According to von Drehle, the ‘Tammany Twins’ then ‘set a blistering pace’ that averaged nearly one public hearing a week...” (Paragraph 20)

**Assignment 3—Discussion Questions**

**Directions:** Write your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Imagine you had to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the passage, how has America changed over time? How have working conditions continued to change in America since the work of Alfred E. Smith, Robert F. Wagner, and Frances Perkins? What additional changes do you think should be made to current working conditions in America? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. In the context of the passage, what can we learn from tragedy? How did the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire help change the public’s opinion on immigrants in America? What else did they learn from the fire? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the passage, how do people create change? How were Alfred E. Smith, Robert F.
Wagner, and Frances Perkins able to create such large changes in America? How would you describe the character of these individuals? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.