

THE EASTLAND DISASTER OF 1915: A SOCIAL ENIGMA

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At 7:30 on the morning of July 24, 1915 the Eastland, one of the many ships chartered for the Western Electric Company's annual picnic, after listing to its port side eventually found itself resting on its side in the Chicago River. Eight hundred and forty-four people lost their lives, 841 of which were passengers, two crewmembers as well as one crewmember of a nearby ship, the Petoskey. Despite the magnitude of this disaster, it remains “a tragedy lost in history.” George Orwell, in his novel 1984, writes, “Who controls the present now controls the past and who controls the past now controls the future.” Collective memory is up to those who control each phase. Those in the past must ensure that it is preserved and those who control the present have a responsibility to accurately recall and fairly represent the past. In the situation of the Eastland Disaster the process of collective memory has failed.

“Both triumphs and tragedies are inherent in social living. The triumphs verify the assumption that plans can be made and implemented, while the traumas remind us that hopes and intentions have their limits.”¹ Why was the tragedy of the Eastland overlooked by so many? Out of 798 respondents to an informal, non-random, non-representative survey only 313 or 39 percent questioned had heard of the Eastland Disaster of 1915. The sample consisted of 399 respondents 59 and younger and 399 respondents 60 and older. Forty-six percent of the older age group had heard of the disaster while only 32 percent of the younger group was aware of the tragedy. Many of the people I interviewed under the age of 59 cited the overshadowing of the Titanic as a reason why people don't remember the Eastland Disaster with only a couple references to World War I. The majority of the older persons (60+) blamed World War I for the lack of storage and retrieval of the Eastland Disaster.

The three major theoretical perspectives in sociology (Conflict, Functionalist, and Interactionist) would have quite distinct answers to the question of why we don't remember

the Eastland Disaster. “The conflict perspective assumes that social behavior is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups.” This perspective would most likely attribute the lack of memory retrieval to the “Average Joe Theory” which blames social inequality. The passengers on the Eastland were not famous or wealthy as in the case of the Titanic. They were poor, working-class people of ethnic origin. The conflict perspective would blame ethnocentrism and elitism for the failed storage and retrieval of the incident.

The functionalist perspective asserts that all aspects of society serve a purpose. If it did not serve a purpose it would not be passed on the next generation. In the case of the Eastland Disaster, the aspect of society is represented by a collective un-conscience. Functionalists would argue that there is an intrinsic reason why many people forget the Eastland Disaster. Whatever the reason or reasons are, the functionalist approach would maintain that the lack of recall serves a purpose or else the tragedy would not have been virtually lost over time.

The interactionist perspective involves a microanalysis as a means of understanding society as a whole. Interactionists may cite a communication breakdown, which is responsible for the collective un-conscience with respect to the Eastland Disaster. An interactionist might specifically site the failure of a survivor of the disaster or a person who recalls hearing about it at the time to pass that memory on to the next generation.

Social amnesia is at the focal point or apex of this phenomenon. Every other theory is subordinate to social amnesia. Social amnesia is identical to psychological amnesia, but encompassing all of a particular society. Once again, the past is stored and retrieved by those who control the present. The Eastland Disaster, at first, was at the forefront in the minds of

Chicagoans. Since 1915, however, the disaster is almost entirely forgotten while the Titanic, the Chicago Fire, the events of World War I, and the Holocaust are still a large part of the collective memory. Why are these events remembered and the Eastland Disaster is all but forgotten?

Perhaps the Eastland Disaster hit “too close to home,” which interrupted the storage process of the collective memory. The Holocaust, wars abroad, and the sinking of the Titanic all occurred at a distance where people felt safely removed. What of the Chicago fire then? The Chicago fire, while initially causing panic and leading to deaths, lead directly to the positive effort of the entire city to rebuild Chicago. That massive effort merely brought Chicagoans closer together and instilled a sense of pride that would be lost if the fire were to become victim to social amnesia. While the Eastland ensued a rescue effort that is not without merit, ultimately it is characterized by the deaths of entire families. The Eastland Disaster did not result in the positive civil outcomes such as in the case of the Chicago Fire. The idea that the disaster hit “too close to home” may have directly contributed to psychological and then social amnesia and eventually the inability or refusal to pass the memory of the Eastland Disaster onto the next generation.

Closely related to the theory that the disaster was “too close for comfort” is the “social ties angle.” The disaster touched the lives of too many people in too close vicinity. Neighborhoods in 1915 had closer ties than Chicago's neighborhoods of today would have. Certain ethnicities tightly clung to each other in their neighborhoods for security and understanding. Go-workers usually lived in the same neighborhoods and developed strong friendships. Tied into that theory is the “Average Joe Theory.” While the Titanic can be glamorized and romanticized, the recall of the Eastland Disaster may be thwarted by social

stratification. Many of the passengers aboard the Titanic were wealthy or famous whereas the Eastland passengers were working-class people of ethnic origin. The social inequality, which is so deeply rooted in society, may have been a factor in the short-lived coverage of the Eastland Disaster.

With reference to the Titanic some believed the sinking of the Titanic to have “stole the thunder” from the Eastland Disaster. I believe this to be true, but not simply because the Titanic sank prior to the Eastland Disaster. The Titanic was the “unsinkable” ship and before it sent sail it received a great amount of publicity. The Titanic was so much in the national spotlight and had such high expectations that a one-way 1st class ticket was \$4,350. At the time it was the grandest ship ever built and the hype contributed to the shock of the disaster. The Eastland was not embarking on a historical voyage; it was simply one of many ships, taking employees to a company picnic.

The events of World War I may have definitely contributed to the failure in the storage process. The Eastland Disaster received press for about a week at which time WWI regained its place in the national and local spotlight. War has always captured the attention of any society. The Eastland Disaster may simply have been overshadowed by the war. In reality, the war may have provided a welcome distraction from the trauma following the Eastland Disaster. Overall, the forms of media available in 1915 logically are not factors in this example of social amnesia simply because many earlier events are remembered while the Eastland is lost somewhere in the collective un-conscience.

Many factors contribute to the case of social amnesia surrounding the Eastland Disaster. While many findings seem more substantial than others there may be an aspect of all theories at work. Perhaps a collective theory arrived at through all three sociological

perspectives would best describe the forces responsible. This case of social amnesia should be observed from the micro as well as macro level. Individuals may have been too traumatized to talk about the disaster while society at large may have been uncomfortable with the closeness of the tragedy or may have been preoccupied with other social issues. It remains that many theories have validity and may all contain a grain of truth and provide a window of opportunity to understand this social enigma.

¹Arthur G. Neal, National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998) 201.

²Richard T. Schaefer, Sociology, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001) 17.