

SS Eastland Disaster

24 July 1915

Often war, racism, and social problems top our list of “sensitive subjects” in the classroom. However, disaster can also be a troublesome topic, especially as it takes many forms. Today’s citizens and students must navigate a field of sources that can be heavily biased and graphic.

The same was true for Chicagoans 100 years ago, when the *SS Eastland* rolled over in the Chicago River claiming the lives of 844 passengers.

Background Information:

Western Electric’s manufacturing arm in Cicero, IL was the massive Hawthorne Works (1905-1985). At one point employing over 45,000 people, the factory had workers from all over the Chicagoland area, many of whom were immigrants and lifelong employees.

At 6:30 AM on the morning of July 24, 1915, the *Eastland* began loading passengers [LaSalle Blvd and Wacker Dr] for a chartered cruise and picnic in Michigan City, IN. One hour later, while still at dock, the ship lurched toward port-side and rolled over in the Chicago River.

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I. The Eastland Disaster

Examine the sources (photographs, newspapers, and film) surrounding the sinking of the *Eastland*.

-Outside of downtown Chicago, how would people have found out about the capsizing of the *Eastland*?

-What vocabulary is unfamiliar to you?

-How would readers have dealt with unknown terms? How do we handle technical terminology when reporting today?

-Observe how the disaster is depicted and described. What do you notice?

-How do you think newspapers helped create and shape the public memory of the event?

II. Eastland and Sewol

On April 16, 2014, a South Korean ferry carrying 476 people capsized, killing 304. Nearly 100 years, the sinking of the *MV Sewol* has striking parallels and differences to that of the *Eastland*.

Examine the media items surrounding the sinking of the *Sewol*.

-What is similar in the reporting of the *Sewol* and the *Eastland*?

-Using the chart below, record some of the differences you noticed between the two incidents:

SS Eastland (1915)	MV Sewol (2014)

-As you saw before, newspapers played a huge part in getting news to people about the *Eastland*. How has that shaped the way we get “breaking news” today?

-How do we perceive a disaster as it unfolds versus later in history?

-What other sources would you want (to corroborate) that are missing from both disasters?

III. Teaching Difficult Topics

When disaster strikes, we do not always have the luxury of carefully selecting sources and/or preparing ourselves mentally. By teaching students how to critically examine and thoughtfully engage with difficult topics, we prepare them to be better prepared for the current era as well as the past.

-How do you select and prepare students for viewing “graphic” material in the classroom?

-When identifying primary sources, we talk about purpose and authority. Look back at the *Eastland* sources. Are all of these sources credible to you? Why or why not?

-What are some of the components of analyzing source credibility?