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History of the World in 10 Storms: Fog, Hurricanes, and the Great Battles of the World.

Rain, fog, wind, frost, drought. There is a silent protagonist that spans millennia and influences the fate of humanity more than kings, generals and revolutions: climate, along with all its atmospheric emissaries. Napoleon had calculated everything but the storm that broke out during the night of the 17th June 1815, making the ground impassable and forcing the emperor to make postponements that proved to be critical; a fog was exploited by Hannibal to achieve victory in the Battle of Lake Trasimene and a climate changes drove the so-called "barbarians" to emigrate, contributing to the fall of the Roman Empire; a snowfall influenced the outcome of the War of the Roses, and a tornado played a key role in the American War of Independence; while it was an anticyclone responsible for the famine that triggered the French Revolution, and observations of clouds that condemned Hiroshima and Nagasaki to becoming targets of the atomic bomb. Vincenzo Levizzani shows how the weather has always acted as the invisible director of major historical events and how it continues to do so today. A work that is also a reflection on ambition and humility: because often when we delude ourselves into thinking we are holding the reins of history, what we actually find enclosed in our hands is but a drop of rain.

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Summary

Prologue

1. Climate and the History of People

Meteorology, Climate, and Extreme Events

It rains, it snows, it hails, but not only... Humans have always been interested in precipitation, and rightly so. What falls from the clouds has always had a positive impact, but also a negative one on human life on Earth. Is it always possible to predict meteorological-climatic events? From our recent experiences, one might be tempted to say yes, but perhaps it's worth going back in time to see if we've always been so good at predicting the weather or tracking the ups and downs of atmospheric conditions. Have we actually become that good at predicting extreme events – does it rain too much, too little, or neither? How have meteorology or climate trends played a role in determining the course of historical events, especially the most fundamental ones? History talks, and it's up to us to consult it for insights that allow us to better interpret the present and understand a rapidly changing climate...

Before delving into the labyrinth of history, we need to definitively clarify what we're talking about. Are the events that have significantly influenced human life on Earth meteorological or climatic in nature? What is the difference between meteorology and climate? Has climate always changed at the same rate, or have there been accelerations that have altered the course of history? Before answering these questions, we will acquire ourselves a basic understanding that will allow us to place events in their meteorological and climatic context without making glaring errors of judgment.

Great Floods

Great Droughts

The history of people has always been influenced by extreme events. In an era like ours, characterised by powerful climate change, rainfall and droughts are increasingly extreme. Has it always been this way in human history, or is ours a unique era? There is an event that we all know about, lost in the mists of time: the so-called Great Flood. We all know that the Holy Bible is a collection of writings that aren't always "historical," and that the events described often have value as "figurative" descriptions of reality. In other words, most of what we read in the Bible has no scientific value. However, the Great Flood, in some ways, is an exception. This isn't to say that Noah's Ark was located on Mount Ararat, but if we do careful historical research, we can see that many ancient cultures, not just the Jewish people, spoke of the Flood. So, is there any truth to this? Another chapter written in the books of various ancient civilizations concerns extreme droughts, those that last hundreds of years. If great floods have heavily influenced the evolution of civilisations, droughts have perhaps contributed even more directly to the evolution, or rather, the regression and even disappearance of flourishing civilisations. This certainly happened in Mesopotamia, and similarly in the Indus Valley. Water is essential to life, and its near-total lack has shaped the course of history more than anything else.

Volcanic Eruptions

The Fall of the Roman Empire

The Little Ice Age

Climate and climate change: we hear about them every day, often in very inaccurate ways. Climate change, it's true, has always existed. We have abundant evidence of this in the rings of very ancient trees, in ice cores from the polar ice caps, in sediment and rocks, and so on. From these studies, we have proof that Earth has experienced very warm periods, but also very cold ones, which have endangered the lives of humans and many animals and plants. If we think these extreme events occurred only in remote eras, we are greatly mistaken. Have we all heard of the "Little Ice Age," which is now thought to have lasted from the mid-14th to the mid-19th century?

Let's look back at the paintings of Brueghel the Elder and those of many other Flemish and British painters: we will see people skating on the frozen Thames. The winter of 1657–1658 saw the Jutland Sea completely frozen over, and this important event aided the King of Sweden in his hostile action against Denmark, marking a turning point in Scandinavian history. The extremely cold winters and the excessively cold and humid springs caused widespread famine, especially in Finland and Estonia, causing a decline in the population. A true global disaster. The cold of the winter of 1672–73 and the preceding floods, however, worked against Louis XIV's French invasion of the Dutch Republic. Finally, what can we say about the terrible winter of 1798–99 and the cold and humid spring of 1799 caused by the persistence of low-pressure systems over the British Isles? The subsequent drought of 1800 prompted the English to send a naval force to the Baltic sea in early 1801. Finally, let's talk about food. The Little Ice Age lasted until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Well, food was of course essential to supporting the workforce, and we will see that the potato, which arrived in Europe after Columbus's voyages to the Americas, played a major role in this regard...

2. Strategy or Weather?

By Sea: The Battle of Salamis

By Land: The Battle of Waterloo

On September 23, 480 BC, the most crucial naval battle of the Second Persian Invasion of Greece took place, pitting the Allied fleet commanded by Themistocles against the Achaemenid Empire of King Xerxes I of Persia. Themistocles led the Greeks to victory not only with his military prowess, but also with his careful timing dictated by the weather. Wind, in essence, played a fundamental role.

3. Thick Fog

Hannibal Challenges Rome at Lake Trasimene

The Battle of the Fog at Canossa

The Crimean War

From climate, we move on to meteorology, starting with one of the most overlooked phenomena: fog. We're accustomed to considering fog a fleeting phenomenon and don't associate it with meteorology. We are wrong, however, because fog consists of low clouds, about the height of our noses. Fog has a profound impact on human life, preventing us from seeing medium-to-long distances. Sometimes, it's icy too, making life difficult for those who are outside. Let alone a commander like Hannibal on his way to battle Rome! How much has fog influenced history, especially military campaigns, but also much more?

4. Snow and Fog over Lancaster and York

The Battle of Towton (1461): Heavy Snowfall

The Battle of Barnet (1471): Thick Fog and Friendly Fire

5. A Fierce Wind Blows

Emperor Theodosius and the Bora

The Washington Tornado

The Bora is a very unique wind. It is cold air that comes from the plains of Eastern Europe and physically "descends" from the mountains and plateaus toward the Adriatic Sea. In other words, it is a "katabatic wind," that is, a wind that "falls" from above, affecting the lower-lying regions that enjoy higher temperatures. The Bora occurs in winter and can bring with it extensive snowfall and a resurgence of winter weather. Emperor Theodosius and his opponent paid the price in the battle for control of the Roman Empire in 394 AD in Slovenia. The wind helped some and hindered others, but then things changed radically...

6. Bad Weather and Invasions

Are the Mongols Coming, or Not?

Hungary (1242)

Japan (1274 and 1281)

The Invincible Armada

It's 1588. Spain has equipped a huge fleet that sets sail for England to defeat the English fleet. Aside from all the strategic considerations regarding the not very maneuverable size of the Spanish galleons versus the extremely maneuverable English ships, the weather also played its part. Spain was severely hampered by the bad weather, which it had not taken into account. In short, a mark of how difficult it has always been to invade the British Isles...

7. Famine and Revolution: 1788

Why talk about 1788 when the most important thing happened in 1789? It's well known that revolutions often have an economic starting point, or rather, they draw fuel from the discontent of populations who perceive their rulers as responsible, often rightly, for their miserable living conditions. The French Revolution was no exception, preceded by a severe drought in the spring of 1788, resulting in poor harvests that summer. To make matters worse, intense hailstorms hit several areas of France in July, and the following winter was very cold. These were the meteorological and climatic conditions for the uprising. Now, it wouldn't be accurate to argue that without bad weather the Revolution would not have occurred, but without a doubt it contributed significantly to creating the right conditions.

8. General Winter

Napoleon and the Russian Campaign

The Crimean War (September 1854–February 1856) saw two major meteorological events that significantly influenced the war effort: the first was a dense fog on 5th November, 1854, and the other a violent thunderstorm on the 14th of the same month. Without adequate forecasts, things went badly for the Russians in the first case and for the Allied naval and land forces in the other. Let's see how.

Hitler and the Aggression Against the Soviet Union

9. The Dawn of Modern Meteorology: World War II

The Allied Landing in Sicily

The Normandy Landings

The Ardennes Offensive

Kokura or Nagasaki?

10. Epilogue

Important Words and Acronyms

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Acknowledgements

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A Pinch of Science

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