

How Weather Has Changed World History

1 It is **tempting**, and often comforting, to think that humans control their **fates**. The decisions that people make in their daily lives can affect many things, and the **course** of their lives **cumulatively** reflects these many small decisions. On the other hand, people cannot control every aspect of their environments, and forces beyond human control frequently **intervene** in human affairs. Notwithstanding many people's opinion that the weather has little influence in their lives besides determining what clothes they wear on a particular day, the weather has in fact caused world history to radically shift in important ways that are still felt today.

2 Numerous examples from world history **document** the long-term effects of weather in the formation of cultures and nations. In the thirteenth century, Khubilai Khan ruled over the vast Mongol empire, which **spanned** from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Black

Sea in the west, from present-day Siberia in the north to Afghanistan in the south. To expand his **reign** further, Khubilai Khan **mounted** two invasions of Japan. Two **monsoons**, however, caused him to end his attacks. Delgado (2008) describes legendary accounts of this event: "The legend, oft repeated in countless history books, speaks of gigantic ships, numbering into the thousands, crewed by indomitable Mongol warriors, and of **casualties** on a massive scale, with more than 100,000 lives lost in the final invasion attempt of 1281" (p. 4). Because of this unexpected defeat, Khubilai Khan decided to **stage** a third invasion of Japan, but he died before he could fulfill this **ambition**. Without these monsoons, Japan might have been defeated by the Mongols and thus lost its identity as a unique culture, with far-reaching consequences for Asian and world history.

3 In the early years of America's Revolutionary War, which began in 1775, it appeared likely that the British would **crush** the armies of her colonial territory and incorporate it back into the empire. The British troops were a well-trained and disciplined army that was feared worldwide. In contrast, the American troops were newly trained, sometimes poorly organized, and lacked sufficient resources to fight effectively. General George Washington could have easily been defeated in the Battle of Long Island on August 22, 1776. Historical records show that Sir William Howe, the British commander, was clearly defeating Washington on Long Island and was actually winning **handily** (Seymour, 1995). Nonetheless, the weather intervened when a heavy **fog** rolled in, so the American forces were able to **retreat**, regroup, and survive to fight

tempting: attractive; desirable

fate: the plan for the future that has been decided and that you cannot control

a course: a route or direction

cumulatively: formed over time by many parts or additions

to intervene: to become involved in something in order to influence the final result

to document: to maintain a written record of; to write about

to span: to extend from one point to another

a reign: a time of political control, especially for kings, queens, or unelected officials

to mount: to prepare something so that it takes place

a monsoon: a strong rain storm that happens at a certain time of the year

a casualty: an injury or death in a severe event such as an accident or a war

to stage: to plan, organize, and make something happen

ambition: a strong desire for power, wealth, or fame

another day. Because of this fog, the United States was not defeated in its struggle for freedom. Consequently, today's United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland does not include the United States. The United States is not a commonwealth of a mother country, as Canada and Australia are, though the United States still has strong **ties** to its colonial past.

4 When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Russia in the early nineteenth century, he met with early successes that appeared to guarantee that he might eventually rule the world as his personal **domain**. His soldiers **captured** Moscow and destroyed the city, which encouraged him to push farther in his military campaigns. However, because of his dreams of glory, Napoleon **overlooked** the simple fact that Russian winters are extremely cold. When the temperatures fell below freezing, many of his soldiers and their horses died in the **brutal** weather. As Belloc (1926) writes in his classic study of the Napoleonic wars, "The cold *was* the **abominable** thing: The **dreadful** enemy against which men could not fight and which destroyed them" (p. 217). As a result of the failure of Napoleon's Russian campaigns, his own rule ended relatively soon after. His defeat led to a reorganization of power throughout the European nations, as well as to the rise of Russia as a major world power.

5 As these three examples **unambiguously** demonstrate, the weather has caused numerous huge shifts in world history as well as in power balances among cultures and nations. Without the rainy storms of the monsoon season, Japan might be the eastern outpost of Mongolia; without the appearance of **dense** fog, the United States might still be a territory of the United Kingdom; and without winter snow, Muscovites might speak French. Today weather **forecasters** can usually predict with a high degree of accuracy when thunderstorms, hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes will strike, but the course of history cannot be fully isolated from the effects of the weather.

References

- Belloc, H. (1926). *Napoleon's campaign of 1812 and the retreat from Moscow*. New York: Harper.
- Delgado, J. (2008). *Khubilai Khan's lost fleet: In search of a legendary armada*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Seymour, W. (1995). *The price of folly: British blunders in the War of American Independence*. London: Brassey's.

Post-Reading

1. What is the topic of the essay? _____
2. What is the writer's thesis? _____

3. What is the cause that the writer describes in the essay? _____

to crush: to destroy

handily: easily

fog: a type of weather similar to a cloud very near the ground

to retreat: to go back

a tie: a connection

domain: land that a ruler or government controls

to capture: to catch; to trap

to overlook: to fail to notice or know about

brutal: severe

abominable: disgusting; causing hateful feelings

dreadful: extremely bad; causing fear

unambiguously: not ambiguously; clearly and definitely

dense: thick

a forecaster: a person who predicts something, often the weather

Building Better Vocabulary

ACTIVITY 4 Practicing Three Kinds of Vocabulary from Context

Read each important vocabulary word or phrase. Locate it in the essay if you need help remembering the word or phrase. Then circle the best synonym, antonym, or collocation from column A, B, or C.

Type of Vocabulary	Important Vocabulary	A	B	C
Synonyms	1. capture	catch	fulfill	prosper
	2. tempting	attractive	inherent	precise
	3. forecast	dread	predict	reign
	4. on account of	due to	prior to	regardless of
Antonyms	5. handily	by vehicle	on foot	with difficulty
	6. dense	thin	superior	reluctant
	7. eventually	beyond	cumulatively	immediately
	8. expand	differentiate	proceed	shrink
Collocations	9. span ___ Greece	from England to	near England and	with England or
	10. ___ in a dispute	duplicate	intervene	merge
	11. a brutal ___	friendship	lunch	storm
	12. defeat ___	an attack	an enemy	a reptile