

Five storms that shaped history

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The current bad weather in the south of the UK prompted a discussion about moments in history shaped by storms. Historian Dan Snow recalls five of the most significant.

1. In 480 BC the emperor of the mighty Persian Empire, Xerxes, led a massive combined force to conquer the troublesome Greeks. More than a third of his fleet was smashed on Greece's rocky eastern shores by a vicious summer gale. His weakened fleet was then routed by the Greeks in one of history's most important sea battles, Salamis. Democracy was saved and a Greek golden age dawned.

2. The Mongol Empire stretched from the Pacific to the Black Sea. In 1274 and 1281 its ruler, Kublai Khan, launched invasions of Japan, countless ships carrying vast numbers of men, bristling with the latest gunpowder weapons. Both times typhoons swept in and sank the Mongol fleets. Priests named the typhoons kamikaze, meaning "divine wind". Japan's independence was assured, as was its powerful sense of indestructibility.



3. In July 1788 the French harvest was obliterated by a three-day hailstorm. The hailstones were apparently the size of "quart bottles" and took days to melt. This followed a run of bad harvests and already high bread prices shot up even further. The people's rage was directed at King Louis XVI's government and a year later the Revolution started in earnest. The Ancien Regime was swept away, unleashing powerful forces that continue to shape the modern world.

4. Britain has been saved from invasion by the weather so often that people used to insist that "God is an Englishman". In 1744 the brilliant French general, de Saxe, was poised to cross the Channel, Bonnie Prince Charlie on standby to be installed as a French puppet, but in February the fleet of naval and transport vessels was sunk and scattered by a fierce storm. France abandoned her plans, Britain's rise to global domination continued uninterrupted.

5. In October 1941 Hitler unleashed a giant attack on Moscow. Capture of Stalin's capital might have won the war for Germany. Atrocious weather mired the Germans first in impassable mud and then in horrific, record-breaking low temperatures and snow storms. Millions were killed and wounded, the Germans were fought to a standstill within sight of the Kremlin. The Soviet Union was saved, Hitler's best chance of winning WWII was shattered.