HEAT WAVES AND THE SWEEP OF HISTORY

This burning summer is taking us out of human time.

By Bill McKibben

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There's history, and there's History—and it's possible that the second is what we're living through in this summer of temperatures never before recorded by humans. Photograph by Petros Giannakouris / AP

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I've been travelling by train across Central Europe this hot summer and, as often happens with Americans, I've been reminded of the sheer density of human history in older corners of the world. On Sunday morning, for instance, I spent a few hours at Hrad Devín, or Devín Castle, a stone

ruin a dozen kilometres upriver from the center of the (low-key and utterly charming) Slovakian city of Bratislava, on the Austrian border, at the spot where the bluish-green Danube meets the olive Morava, flowing in from the mountains of the Czech-Polish border. It's such a clearly strategic spot that it's no wonder people have been settling here for millennia. There are excavations of an old Celtic community from the first century B.C., ultimately replaced by a Germanic population that established links with the Roman Empire, which eventually built structures here, possibly part of a defensive line that protected the Amber Road, which saw trade in everything from honey to brass. By the ninth century A.D., it was a border fortress for Greater Moravia, and a site of conflict between the Moravian and Frankish Empires; by the thirteenth century, the castle was in the hands first of an Austrian duke, then Rugerius of Tallesbrunn, then Charles Robert of Anjou, the King of Hungary. A noble family from Croatia took it over in the fifteenth century, and then it changed hands until Louis II of Hungary acquired it. It was taken and retaken in various revolts involving the Habsburgs and, for reasons that no one appears to understand, Napoleon blew it up while prosecuting some campaign or another in 1809. And when the Iron Curtain was beginning to crumble, tens of thousands of Bratislavans marched to the foot of the castle and began to cut the barbed-wire fence that separated them from Austria.

What I'm trying to say is, history has had its way with the place. During something called the War of the Babenberg Succession, in the thirteenth century, the castle was taken and destroyed multiple times in an effort to sort out who would rule the area. The idea of fighting a war that stems from a question of dynastic inheritance seems preposterous to us, but to people alive then it was a matter of life and death, a thing worth killing or being killed for. People from Romans and Slavs to capitalists and Communists have contested this site over the millennia, as the Danube rolled serenely on. This history is in many ways sad (all those bloody wars), but, perhaps, in some ways consoling: looking back in time somehow makes the war in Ukraine, or

the contest over Taiwan, seem part of the ebb and flow of history—crucial events in the life of our time but also ones that (assuming we avoid the use of nuclear weapons) people will one day regard as yet more chapters in the human story.

But there's history, and there's History, and it's possible that the second is what we're living through in this summer of temperatures never before recorded by humans. In a cave beneath Devín Castle, there is a small display of fossils found during an excavation of the site—little sea creatures, dating from the Tertiary period after the last great extinction event, when the dinosaurs were wiped out. The Tertiary ended with the onset of glaciations 2.6 million years ago; before that, there were times when, according to geologists at a Slovakian university, brackish Lake Pannon covered the Bratislava region. The ebbs and flows of History come in much grander scale, and the heat currently on display around the planet is consonant with that kind of much grander change.

Jim Hansen, a NASA physicist, said earlier this month that it's possible that we're now headed into climate territory not seen in a million years. While I was standing atop the castle, my phone pinged with an alert about widespread fires on the Greek island of Rhodes—which forced the hurried and chaotic evacuation of some nineteen thousand people. Rhodes has a long history of its own, dating back well before the Christian era, when its prosperity allowed its residents to erect the Colossus, a bronze statue of the sun god Helios, which was the size of the Statue of Liberty and collapsed decades later in an earthquake. But even the remnants were so mighty that ancient tourists came to stare at them, as I was staring at this wrecked castle. That's history again. But here's what History looks like: "According to the data, we will probably go through 16-17 days of a heatwave, which has never happened before in our country," Kostas Lagouvardos, a director of research at Greece's National Observatory, explained. The temperature is off the charts that track history; like the temperatures in so many other places, they're increasingly on the charts which track History.

This doesn't mean that our history is over yet. From the summit of the hill on which Hrad Devín sits, the view toward Austria encompasses dozens of windmills turning steadily in the summer breeze; they, and the solar panels that are our current tribute to the god Helios, give us a chance. Slovakia's President at the moment is a woman named Zuzana Čaputová, who came to prominence leading a decade-long fight against a toxic landfill. Greenpeace rates Bratislava's public-transit system as the fifth best in Europe, trailing only those of Tallinn, Luxembourg, Valletta, and Prague. But that's not going to be enough. It's going to take action on an entirely different scale to deal with what we're facing at the moment, which is why campaigners in the U.S. are urging President Biden to declare a climate emergency, allowing him to restrict some trade in fossil fuels and make funds available so that states can build out renewable energy faster—maybe even fast enough to start catching up with the escalating velocity of global heating. Some kind of climate emergency declaration is a key demand of activists organizing a New York City march on September 17th, which seems to be gathering momentum.

But, of course, Republicans from Texas and West Virginia, two of the key historical hydrocarbon producers, are even now leading a push for legislation that would prevent Biden from taking such a step. (The two lead sponsors, unsurprisingly, have received campaign contributions from the fossil-fuel industry.) "Our legislation insures that President Biden does not abuse the power of his office to pursue his anti-American energy agenda against the will of the American people," Representative August Pfluger explained. He went to high school in the West Texas town of San Angelo, right on the edge of the Permian Basin, one of the largest oil deposits in the world. That oil is the result of History; its power is driving our history, which now seems to be driving History again. Unless we intervene, the certain result is ruins. ♦