

Volcanic Eruption Changed The Course Of History

*„The sun fades away, the land sinks into the sea,
the bright stars disappear from the sky,
as smoke and fire destroy the world,
and the flames burn the sky.“*

- The end of the world according to the „Völuspa,”
a collection of Icelandic myths

Thousands of people (including 23,000 British) died from the poisoning, and crops suffered from the biblical weather patterns. Droughts, severe thunderstorms, hailstorms, floods, and frigid winters all plagued the Europeans during that time, and poverty and famine significantly increased.

In France, the climactic disruption, poor harvests, and poverty resulting from the Laki and Grímsvötn eruptions caused years of political unrest and upheaval. This helped ignite the French Revolution in 1789.

Elsewhere in the world, the eruptions were no less grave, and famines were widespread. In the Nile River region, the eruptions disrupted regular monsoon patterns, and there was less precipitation than usual in 1784. This resulted in a famine that claimed one sixth of Egypt's population.



In Japan, severely cold weather destroyed the rice harvest, causing a famine between 1783 and 1786 that was one of the worst in Japanese history. Nearly a million people died as a result.

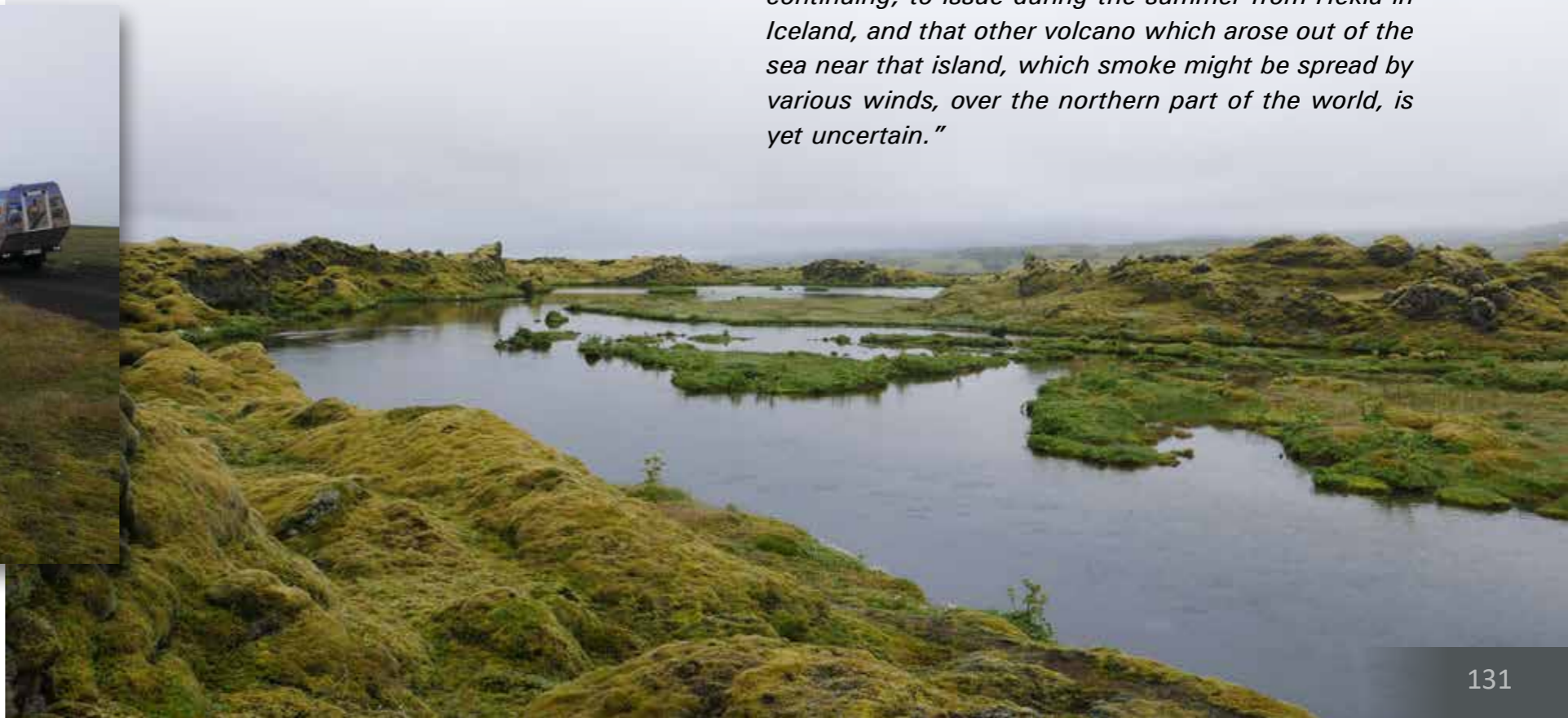
And in the newly independent United States, the winter of 1784 was one of the longest and coldest in recorded history. New England experienced the longest below-zero temperatures on record; New Jersey experienced the largest accumulation of snow; the Chesapeake Bay froze over for the longest period on record; the Mississippi River froze at New Orleans; and people reported ice floes in the Gulf of Mexico.

In a 1784 lecture, Benjamin Franklin commented on the eruptions' effects in North America and Europe:





"During several of the summer months of the year 1783, when the effect of the sun's rays to heat the earth in these northern regions should have been greater, there existed a constant fog over all Europe, and a great part of North America. This fog was of a permanent nature; it was dry, and the rays of the sun seemed to have little effect towards dissipating it, as they easily do a moist fog, arising from water. They were indeed rendered so faint in passing through it, that when collected in the focus of a burning glass they would scarce kindle brown paper. Of course, their summer effect in heating the Earth was exceedingly diminished. Hence the surface was early frozen. Hence the first snows remained on it unmelted, and received continual additions. Hence the air was more chilled, and the winds more severely cold. Hence perhaps the winter of 1783-4 was more severe than any that had happened for many years.



The cause of this universal fog is not yet ascertained [...] or whether it was the vast quantity of smoke, long continuing, to issue during the summer from Hekla in Iceland, and that other volcano which arose out of the sea near that island, which smoke might be spread by various winds, over the northern part of the world, is yet uncertain."



Benjamin Franklin was correct in his assessment that an Icelandic volcano was responsible for the climactic shifts. Truly, the Laki eruption changed the course of history.

