

# Perception, Depiction and Description of European History: Leopold von Ranke and his Development and Understanding of Modern Historical Writing

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For many centuries historians have sought to find ways of presenting their histories. Then and now scholars tried to determine how to perceive, depict and describe history, and across the centuries how they did this changed, varied and was revised. In recent decades this issue has become even more complex as the variety of historical topics studied widened not only into specialized fields, but also in the use of sources and the presentation of history in a written or televised form. This broadening of the field can make it more difficult to find a path to good scholarly research. To explore this issue, I have chosen, as an example, the scholar Ranke whose methods changed academic historical understanding in the nineteenth century and still influence us today. It will be my aim to investigate his influence in this article. But who was Ranke?

The German historian Leopold von Ranke was born in Germany in 1795 (Iggers and Powell, 1990). His first major work, *History of the Latin and Teutonic nations, 1494-1535*, was published late in 1824. This was based on archival research, viewed by Ranke as the foundation of all historical work, and it established his reputation as an historian. The most influential part of the work was its appendix in which he assessed previous literature on the basis of the critical analysis of sources. For him, this was scholarly history. It was in the preface to his work that he stated his often quoted dictum,

that he was writing history as it had actually occurred, '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*'. Due to the success of his work, Ranke was appointed Professor of History at the University of Berlin. Ranke went abroad late in 1827 and remained away for over three years, researching in Vienna, Florence, Rome and Venice. He had several personal connections that he put to good use to secure access to previously closed archives. The following years were marked with publications mainly on the history of the Mediterranean countries and Germany. Particularly noteworthy are *The conspiracy against Venice* (1831), *History of the popes* (1834-36), *History of Germany during the Reformation* (1839-47) and the *History of Prussia* (1847-8) (Iggers and Powell, 1990).

Ranke trained the first generation of 'modern professional historians' at Berlin, including Georg Waitz and Jakob Burckhardt. King Maximilian II of Bavaria was inspired by him to establish a Historical Commission within the Bavarian Academy of Sciences to which Ranke was appointed as chairman in 1858. During his later years Ranke wrote national histories for each of the major states of Europe, including his *History of France* (1852-61), *History of England* (1859-68) and *The German powers and the Princes' League* (1871). As Ranke's reputation continued to grow, he was awarded many honours: he was granted entry to the hereditary nobility, adding '*von*' to his surname in 1865 and he was made an honorary citizen of Berlin in 1885. Ranke's university career concluded in 1871 when he retired from his chair at Berlin. Nonetheless by the time of his death in Berlin in 1886, he had completed nine volumes of his *Universal history* (Iggers and Powell, 1990).

Leopold von Ranke endeavoured to understand political order within its own historical context. To understand the nature of

historical phenomena, such as an institution or an idea, one had to consider its historical development and the changes it underwent over a period of time. Historical epochs, Ranke argued, should not be judged according to predetermined contemporary values or ideas. Rather, they had to be understood on their own terms by empirically establishing history ‘as things really were’. Ranke emphasised both ‘individuality’ and ‘development’ in history. Each historical phenomenon, epoch and event had its own individuality and it was the task of the historian to establish its essence. To do this, historians had to immerse themselves in the epoch and assess it in a manner appropriate for that time. They had, in Ranke’s words, ‘to extinguish’ their own personality. He was convinced in all his work that there was meaning and coherence in history and that the established political institutions embodied moral forces, yet he rejected the reduction of history to a grand scheme. In Ranke’s opinion, the historian had to proceed from the particular or individual to the general, not the reverse, and it was the particular that opened the path to an understanding of the great moral forces manifest in history. With his seminar programme at the University of Berlin, Ranke set a model for training historians in systematic, critical research methods, which was copied throughout the world as history became a professional discipline. Ranke made important contributions to the emergence of modern history and is generally recognised as the father of the ‘scientific’ historical school of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Due to him, methodical principles of archival research and source criticism became commonplace in academic institutions (Iggers and Powell, 1990).

But what does this mean about his practical work? How did Ranke actually conduct his research on any chosen topic? Starting

with his first work, Ranke conducted archival research throughout his life. Wherever he was, Ranke made copies, took notes or even acquired original documents. During his life, he collected over 50,000 documents, which are today kept in the States Library of Berlin, Germany, and Syracuse University Library, USA (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin; Syracuse University Library). This did not mean that Ranke did not use secondary sources. His private library amounted to 24,000 books, which today is held by Syracuse University Library. His research method arose in response to the problem that previous historians just copied earlier books without conducting archival research or doing a critical source analysis. Ranke looked at contemporary and eyewitness statements instead. This led to Ranke publishing books, such as *The conspiracy against Venice 1618* (1831), in which he analysed a single moment of European history and conducted a critical source analysis. Although dealing with source criticism of primary and secondary sources from his very first work, this particular book represents the best example of his critical source analysis. In it, Ranke examined contemporary eyewitness reports, documents and books dealing with the conspiracy. This work, the book *History of the Latin and Teutonic nations* (1824) and his article on the *History of Don Carlos* (1829b) are examples of his theory put into practice – and, although in later works he rarely called as much attention to it, his method did not change.

Through my research on Ranke and his connection to Ireland – his wife was Anglo-Irish – I have also examined his *History of England* (1859-68; 1875) and how Ranke presented Ireland within this work. Unlike most English historians, who did not use Gaelic sources, Ranke tried to include as much as possible. He constantly

asked his relatives to search in archives and even had Gaelic sources translated for him (Boldt, 2007). The research trip to England and Ireland undertaken in 1865 is another example of Ranke's constant search for 'historical truth'. It actually postponed the printing of Ranke's appendix volume of the *History of England* by three years because he found new manuscripts in the collection of Sir Thomas Philipps (Boldt, 2007). Manuscript excerpts such as 'The Jacobite Diary' found their way into the appendix. This and other documents, like the accounts of Count Lauzun, remain important as primary printed sources for Irish history and Ranke deserves credit for the selection and publication of such sources. It also shows that primary sources were important to Ranke's work and that the sources he uncovered were often of great historical importance.

But the example of the *History of England* is not a singular one. Throughout all his works Ranke used a large variety of sources, ranging from primary to secondary sources, literature and even oral sources. His book *History of Serbia* (1829a) is a perfect example of Oral History, for which the Serbian historian Wuk was the source. Ranke regarded his interviews with Wuk as a reliable source and as accurate as written traditional accounts. Ranke used Wuk as, due to the restrictions of occupying powers, history in Serbia in the early nineteenth century could only be taught orally. In later versions Ranke also used poetry and songs as sources for the history of the Serbian Revolution. The English translation of this book remained until the early 1990s the only work on the history of Serbia in the English-speaking world (Geiss, personal communication, 8 March 2002).

Despite being described by many scholars of the twentieth century, such as Mommsen (1954) and Vierhaus (1957), as a

historian only dealing with political history and the history of great powers, Ranke actually dealt with cultural history as well. In many of his works cultural history may be only mentioned briefly, but in some cases Ranke dedicated a full chapter to the history of literature. For example in his *History of England*, one can find a full chapter on the literature during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It covers nearly 20 pages (1859, I, pp.588-606; 1875, I, pp.450-64). In an eighty-five page article from 1835 Ranke dealt only with the history of Italian literature.

Although he made a huge impact on nineteenth and twentieth-century historiography and many of his books became and remained standard works, Ranke's methods and theories have proved to be controversial. For instance, in 1980 A.G. Dickens investigated Ranke as a Reformation historian. He analysed Ranke's personal connection with religion before discussing Ranke's *History of the Reformation in Germany* and the Peasant's Revolt of 1524-25. Dickens compared Ranke with a number of other historians and pointed out that Ranke simply copied earlier works on the reformation. On Ranke's own career, Dickens wrote that 'the general direction of his early progress was from the airy-fairy to the nitty-gritty' (1980, p.3). Dickens concluded that 'a good deal has been written concerning Ranke's philosophy of history, but personally I cannot see that he possessed any mental contraption which deserved so grandiose a title' (1980, p.3). Hoefl and Fuchs edited a number of Ranke's letters in 1949 (1949a and b), and the edited publication has been praised for its insight into Ranke as a private man. Many letters, however, were shortened, and Fuchs – a former member of the NSDAP – tried to give the impression of a 'religious' Ranke, which was perpetuated in most publications of post-war Germany. One

example of the 'religious Ranke' interpretation was provided by Hans Liebeschütz in 1954, who did not try 'to defend nor to attack Ranke but to explain him' (1954, p.2), mainly from the religious viewpoint that affected Ranke's political thoughts and his historical writing. Emil Michael (1980), on the other hand, had proved over sixty years earlier in his critical analysis of Ranke's *Universal history*, that Ranke was not religious at all. Nevertheless, the myth of a 'religious Ranke' has survived until today. Many scholars believe that a 'religious' minded historian would not be able to write colourless history and would take the side of a specific confession. In 1975 Hayden White examined Ranke's methods and found that Romantic impulses were present in his historiographical writing. White (1975) believed that history in general is in reality a form of novel writing. He found in Germany a number of followers of postmodern historiography who believed that the poet Schiller is the first modern German historian and not Ranke. A completely different approach was attempted by Wilhelm Mommsen. He noted how often Ranke used certain words in his books, for instance the word 'nation' was used one hundred and ninety times in the *History of France*. Mommsen tried to explain Ranke's historical writing by his use of specific words and his treatment of social classes (1954, pp.95-111). Both Mommsen and White believe that Ranke was a Romantic historian: White from a postmodern perspective whereas Mommsen examined Ranke as a social historian.

New results presented by Siegfried Baur in 1998, showed the development of Ranke's historical method in his early years. Baur shattered the myth that Ranke as a born historian: Ranke had to learn like everybody else. Other works on Ranke were produced in America in the 1980s and 90s notably by Iggers and Powell. Their

biggest contribution was a publication on *Ranke and the shaping of the historical discipline* (Iggers and Powell, 1990). Iggers placed Ranke in the context of the German tradition of historical writing and made major contributions by redefining Ranke's empiricism and analysing his idealistic conception of history. Iggers pointed out that truth is essentially a consensus of what is accepted by the 'scientific community' and argued that 'objective' history had to be understood as 'history free of its political aims' (1990, p.173).

Despite some discussion over Ranke's historical significance, he is overwhelming seen as a German nationalist and a Protestant conservative historian, who wrote only monarchist and political history. His works on the states of Prussia, Germany, France and England are listed as examples. But how far is this true?

In his work *History of England*, Irish history was treated slightly differently from Scottish or English history. On several occasions, Ranke demonstrated support for the Catholic Irish, especially concerning the treatment of people at the storming of Drogheda in 1649. This is striking when compared to the fact that previous scholars stressed the religiously 'Protestant' nature of Ranke and his sympathetic empathy with the Protestant cause (Mommsen, 1954; Vierhaus, 1957). Although in some cases of English history this Protestant 'support' shines through, for instance in the victory of Queen Elizabeth I over the Spanish Armada (Ranke, 1859, I, p.433; Ranke, 1875, I, p.327), in writing Irish history Ranke showed open support for the Irish and their Catholic cause. This also supports the view Ranke expressed in his *History of Serbia*: 'Suppressed people also have their own history' (1829a, p.11). Perhaps Ranke's sympathy towards the underdog has been mistaken for support of particular religious causes.



Ranke did not approach English and Irish history in the same way, nor did he treat them 'objectively', to use the word that his disciples applied to him. He was certainly not objective when he harshly condemned Cromwell's actions at the storm of Drogheda:

Scenes like this are hardly to be explained even by fanaticism. Did Cromwell really imagine that he was executing the justice of God on these people, whose hands were imbrued with innocent blood? Did he believe that he was [...] urged on by a higher divine spirit? (Ranke, 1859, III, p.347-8; Ranke, 1875, III, pp. 33).

Ranke endeavoured, however, to write with detachment. This led him to try and explain why it was that nineteenth-century Ireland was characterised by a large Catholic majority ruled by a small Protestant minority. Unlike English historians, such as Macaulay and Froude, Ranke did not use the past in order to justify this situation; instead he used the past to understand it. When writing Irish history Ranke wrote not only the history of Ireland itself, but also the history of Ireland in a British and European context. Ranke was criticised by many German historians, who preferred national historiography rather than his approach of writing transnational history. Usually Ranke is criticised for writing so-called 'victor's history', but the example of Ireland shows that although Ireland may have lost the main battles in seventeenth century, the positive treatment of the Irish makes those events relative. It is suggested that his account of 'how things really were' also includes space for the thought that every loser can become a victor in time and only time will be the permanent victor. This opinion is also expressed in his *History of Germany during the Reformation* when he wrote about the constant battle between the confessions: 'victories are quickly won:

to establish their success, however, is the difficult task' (1843, V, p. 3).

Ranke's understanding of the Irish 'nation' is interesting. Previous scholars suggested that the word does not mean unity of the state but the population itself (Mommsen, 1954; Vierhaus, 1957). In the case of Ireland, Ranke makes it clear that 'nation' did not mean only its population, but also the unity of the state and the Catholic Church. Ranke did not follow the Hegelian understanding of 'one nation – one land – one language' but, in the case of Ireland, he viewed the unity of the people, their shared Catholic religion and traditions, and the island as a natural boundary, as a nation. This different definition of a nation is reflected in several national histories written by Ranke. In a book on the Thirty Years' War in Germany, published in 1874, Ranke dealt critically with the definition of the newly German *Kaiserreich* under Bismarck: 'It is not that easily done, that a nation can speak the same language and has similar traditions' (1874, p.3).

Ranke wrote not only on German history, but on the history of a number of states in nineteenth-century Europe. His historical writing created an awareness of their own history in a number of states, like in Ireland, Serbia and Germany, and an international network of historians developed. The network consisted on many European scholars, societies and associations and included personal connections, presentations and exchange of journals. This network is also evidence for the exchange of information amongst scholars within Europe. As long as the sources were indicated, Ranke preferred the free exchange of information because it was only in that way that history could continue to develop.

An investigation of Ranke's private life reveals a very complex personality. Growing up with traditions of the old order he was as much a conservative as an academic 'revolutionary'. He would not support violent revolution because he believed in the ordained nature of 'God-given' structures. This had little to do with religion, but rather it shows that Ranke preferred, due to his childhood education, states and orders which evolved 'naturally' over time and found their organic situation within the society of a state (Boldt, 2007). That is one of the reasons why Ranke had what appeared to be contradictory views with conservative inclinations on some issues, for instance his opposition to revolutionaries, while on others he held more revolutionary ones, such as the creation of nations like Ireland and Serbia or a favourable approach to female emancipation. Ranke was always interested in educated women and his wife came from a highly educated and emancipated background. However, he moved within a patriarchal society, which did not approve female emancipation (Boldt, 2007). It also explains why Ranke stood in such good stead with the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasty, illustrated by the fact that the Prussian monarchs invited Ranke to the University of Berlin in 1824 and made many archives available to him in the following years. A large degree of Ranke's success was due to the help of the Prussian kings. However if they had not requested several times that he write on German and Prussian history, Ranke might have spent more time working on other national histories, for instance Russia, which he is known to have been interested in (Boldt, 2007).

Many scholars have written on Ranke and analysed his understanding of history. One example of how Ranke was scrutinised is the discussion of the meaning of his most famous

phrase of *'wie es eigentlich gewesen'*. The book *History of the Latin and Germanic nations* is known chiefly for the statement that:

Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren beygemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloß sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen. (Ranke, 1824, pp.v-vi).

To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened. (Stern, 1973, p.57, translation by Fritz Stern).

The meaning of Ranke's aim to study the past *'wie es eigentlich gewesen'* has been the subject of much debate among historians. A number of writers have translated the phrase as 'what actually happened', 'as it really was' or 'simply tell how it was' and have understood it as an endorsement of 'colourless' history. Historians, Ranke claimed, should stick to the facts and there should be no evidence of their views and commitments in their writing. It is only when they remove all trace of themselves that they can revive the past. More recent commentators, such as Iggers, have argued that such a translation is not accurate because it does not reveal Ranke's 'idealistic' conception of history. He pointed out that the term *'eigentlich'* does not only mean 'actually', but also 'essentially' or 'characteristically'. Therefore Iggers preferred to translate the phrase as '[History] merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened' (1988, p.67). The translation of Ranke's quotation into English has its problems. One thing is certain, however, Ranke's famous sentence is a conscious formula that contains a very complex meaning. The word *'bloß'* shows Ranke's modesty while the word *'eigentlich'* touches on issues like 'truth' and 'the greatest good'. The

translation 'happened' describes an event or condition; it does not describe a development. The usual translation 'how it really was' is too short and does not describe what Ranke intended to say. As a more correct translation, I would suggest 'how things really were'.

Ranke preferred writing national histories in a European context. Despite the criticism of writing 'dry as dust' history, Ranke expounded the vision of a unified Europe, following the example of the Holy Roman Empire. This vision is represented in all of his books, which not only cover the bigger powers, England, Spain, Russia, France and Germany, but also smaller states and institutions such as Belgium, Serbia or the Catholic Church. National histories were always embedded into the European context. With this approach, Ranke was able to analyse the complex political and religious systems of Europe. In his *History of the Popes* he commented that:

It was never possible in our Europe, that neither a power nor an ideological concept, the least a political one, was able to develop to absolute power (Ranke, 1836, II, p. 190).

When dealing with French history he came to the conclusion that:

It lies possibly in the nature of European affairs that a rising power, tempting to become the superior one, will always create a strong counter-power (Ranke, 1856, I, p. 94).

Are Ranke's methods still valid? I would suggest that Ranke's methods are not as often put into practice as one wishes. From my own experience I suggest that one should look at all the sources available. Sometimes new sources and new knowledge can be found in this way and one has to follow a researcher's instinct. One needs

to be open to any kind of source and not neglect any of them just because they might be inconvenient. For example, a professor in Germany advised me to ignore a small archive as ‘the letters were just from a woman’. Yet, that collection of 600 unpublished letters of Ranke’s wife Clarissa proved to be the biggest and most valuable find of my research (Wiehe, Ranke-Museum).

This leads us to the last issue: what is the place of personal perceptions or biases in historical writing? The main answer would be very short: there is no place or room for the historian’s own opinion in historical writing. If we want to establish, ‘how things really were’, we have to view and analyse the time period and how issues were viewed at that time. It is and continues to be true that ‘history will always be rewritten,’ as Ranke wrote into his diary in the 1840s (1964, I, p.241). History should never be viewed from one-side. In his *Epochs about the Modern History* Ranke noted: ‘The truth lies possibly in the middle’ (1971, II, p.445). Baur analysed in 2001 how critics from the left and right dealt with Ranke and he came to the conclusion that ‘whoever misuses history to satisfy ideological needs can never accept Ranke’s histories, critical source-based science, and its autonomous movements’ (2001, p.14). As much as possible, we should try not to let ourselves get carried away with today’s views or ideological ideas. After all, if we believe what Ranke said, we are indeed a product of the historical moment in which we live.

Ranke’s historical approach differed widely from his contemporaries. He did not follow the Romantic Movement, nor did he compose providential history, or become friendly with the ideas of Social Darwinism. He followed the Continental tradition of rationalism and realism. This is probably the reason why Ranke on

one hand is highly respected, on the other hand highly criticized. I fully agree with his research methods, even if Ranke could not keep his utmost aim of objectivity throughout his work. Certainly his methods are still valid today, no matter what kind of history we study.

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